



Mountain Man Wanted (Hard Timber Mountain Men #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: I was built to survive the wilderness, not a woman wrapped up in sunshine who can see right through me.

They say silence is safe. That if you don't let anyone in, you can't lose anything. I believed that—right up until Joely Windom crashed into my world. She's loud, relentless, and way too curious for her own good. A city girl with a notebook full of questions and a laugh that echoes through the pines. She's supposed to be passing through, writing some article that has nothing to do with me. Except now it does.

Now she's in my cabin. In my space. Under my skin. And every wall I've spent years building? She's tearing down with that damn smile. I'm not used to wanting. But I want her. Bad. She thinks I'm just another closed-off mountain man with too many secrets. She's not wrong. But the second she looked at me like I was worth unraveling, something cracked wide open.

Now I've had a taste—of her laugh, her fire, her mouth on mine—and the silence I used to live in doesn't feel like safety anymore. It feels like losing her. I don't chase things. I don't beg. But for her? I'd burn the whole forest down if that's what it takes to make her stay.

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THATCHER

The sun was barely peeking over the mountains when I pulled into a spot in front of the Huckleberry Cafe.

There were only a few other folks out this early.

Hard Timber was a sleepy little mountain town, even in the summer.

We didn't get many visitors, there wasn't much drama, and that's exactly how I liked it.

Friday mornings were for supply runs. It was the only time I left my refuge up the mountain and came into town to stock up on the things I needed and pick up my mail.

My routine always started with breakfast at the cafe.

Nellie's family had been running the place since it opened over a hundred years ago.

It was just as much a part of Hard Timber as the mountains themselves.

The smell of cinnamon, coffee, and bacon frying on the griddle swept over me as I entered.

Country music from an AM station out of Whitefish floated through the speakers while a TV on the wall over the counter played the news on mute.

I nodded toward Nellie as I headed to my regular booth in the back.

She already knew my order without me saying a word.

That was one benefit of being a creature of habit.

“Morning, Thatcher.” She set a cup of hot, black coffee down on the table in front of me. “How’s the ghost of Hard Timber doing this morning?”

I cleared my throat, but my voice still came out hoarse since I hadn’t used it in a few days. “Ghost?”

Nellie pushed her thick glasses back up on her nose. She had her gray hair pulled back in her usual bun and a shit-eating grin stretched across her face. “I take it you haven’t seen the post that went up last night on Hard Timber’s Facespace page?”

Grunting, I reached for the mug. “Not really my thing.”

“You might want to check it out.”

“Doubt it.” The coffee hit the back of my throat, a welcome distraction from the conversation.

“Suit yourself, sugar. Your order will be out in a few minutes.” She turned to head back to the kitchen, quickly weaving between tables like a woman a quarter of her age.

I swept my gaze around the cafe while I waited.

Yellowed photos of Hard Timber hung on the walls.

Faces of the men who'd founded the town around the old lumbermill peered down at me, some of them my own ancestors.

Back then, it had been a booming hotspot for folks looking for a place to settle.

The population rose into the thousands. Hard Timber had an unending supply of trees, access to freshwater lakes, and sat along the route goldminers took on their way to California.

Now the town was a shadow of what it had been in the past. The lumbermill shut down, the mines tapped out, and the population shifted toward the bigger towns. That suited me fine.

Just as I turned my attention back to my coffee, my younger brother Holt pushed through the front door looking like a man who'd spent all night long fighting monsters again.

He must have just dropped my nephew off at camp and come in for some coffee.

Being a single dad was hard, but being a single dad to a kid who battled night terrors meant a good night's sleep was wishful thinking and mainlining coffee was a requirement.

As he barreled toward me, he waved his phone in the air.

"Did you see this?" Holt asked. "Somebody posted it last night, and it's already got a ton of shares."

I leaned back against the booth and sighed. This wasn't how my morning was supposed to go.

“Did I see what?” I grumbled, wishing I’d stayed home today. The supply run could have waited, though I did have a few other things I needed to do in town.

The table rattled as Holt slid in across from me and set his phone down between us. “Look. They’re calling you the ghost of Hard Timber.”

I glanced down at his phone.

The Ex-List - 6 Hard Timber Mountain Men You Should Definitely Avoid

We were all there: me, my brothers Holt and Dane, and a few of my buddies like Ridge, Harlan and Trace. My gut clenched and anger tightened my jaw.

“What the fuck is this?” I growled.

Holt shook his head. “I don’t know who’s behind it. Did you see what they wrote about you? What they wrote about me?”

I snagged his phone and scrolled through the article.

Number Two - Thatcher Thorne - This bearded recluse is hotter than a bonfire burning out of control, but he’ll disappear on you faster than a trout who just snagged the bait right off your line.

Nicknamed “The Ghost of Hard Timber,” he’s more elusive than the legendary Big Foot and more prickly than Miss Nellie’s pet porcupine.

Do yourself a favor. Stay out of his way and definitely stay out of his bed.

““The Ghost of Hard Timber”? Is that the best they can do?” I slid Holt’s phone back across the table just as Nellie set my plate down in front of me.

“‘The Ghost of Hard Timber’ sounds pretty spot on to me,” Nellie said. “We barely see you around town unless you’re making a supply run.”

I grunted and picked up my fork.

“What are we gonna do about this?” Holt asked.

Shrugging, I shoved a forkful of scrambled eggs into my mouth. I wasn’t like my brothers or my friends. Some of them actually cared what people thought while I’d given up on giving a shit a long time ago.

Holt shook his head as he scrolled on his phone. “Everyone’s going to be pissed.”

I swallowed and looked over at Nellie. If anyone had an idea of who’d written such a piece of trash, it would be her. She was always at the center of everything that went on around town.

“Who do you think is behind this?” I asked.

She gave me one of her sweet smiles—the one that said there was something she wasn’t going to tell me. “Don’t you think there’s another question you might want to ask that’s even more important?”

“No.” I reached for my coffee. It was too early to play mind games with Nellie, though she never passed up an opportunity to teach “her boys” a lesson, especially if it involved emotions and feelings and shit.

She’d been the high school guidance counselor when I was in high school. It wasn’t until after she retired that she took over running the cafe from her own mom. Miss Maggie still made appearances every once in a while, and her huckleberry pie would always be the best in the county.

“What question is that?” Holt asked. Not only was he a single dad to my six-year-old nephew, but he was also the only one of us who went on to join the fire crew.

If he wanted folks around town to trust him, he couldn’t have his reputation fucked over, especially by something as stupid as a post on social media.

Nellie shook her head, but her eyes still held their sparkle. “Instead of trying to figure out who wrote it, maybe you two should be more worried about what landed you on that list in the first place.”

“Well, that’s easy.” Holt reached for my coffee mug, but I batted his hand away. I needed all the caffeine I could get this morning. He scowled at me. “Thatcher made the list because the longest relationship he’s ever had lasted all of about three days.”

I wouldn’t curse in front of Nellie, but the glare I gave him should have been strong enough to make him think twice about continuing. Unfortunately, he took a great amount of personal pleasure in making me uncomfortable, so he kept talking.

“Remember that woman you went out with a couple of years ago from Granite Gulch?” The corner of Holt’s mouth curled up in a lopsided smile. “I’d say you ghosted her. Maybe she’s the one who put you on the list.”

Rolling my eyes, I picked up my fork again. “We went out once, and she asked if she could move in with me. That wasn’t ghosting, it was self-preservation.”

Nellie clucked her tongue, sounding like one of her prized chickens she was constantly doting on. The woman had always collected strays in one way or another, both animals and humans.

“Now, boys,”—she patted my shoulder—“maybe this list isn’t such a bad thing. It could give you the chance to work on parts of yourselves you might want to

improve.”

I forced myself not to flinch. Nellie was touchy-feely, and I tolerated it because she’d been there for me and my brothers when no one else had. She was probably the closest thing to a grandmother I’d ever known, and even though she got under my skin, it was only because she cared.

“The only thing Holt wants to improve is his chance of getting through a week without stepping on a plastic T-Rex,” I mumbled.

“Hysterical,” Holt said. “You should try doing some stand up at The Knotty Pine this week.”

“Yeah, right. With this crap hanging over my head, you’ll be lucky if you see me in town again until it all dies down.” I shoveled the last bit of eggs into my mouth, eager to get on with my day.

Holt leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “You’re still coming to Trail Supper tonight though, right?”

Before I could answer, Nellie clapped her hands together. “And you promised you’d help with the farmer’s market kick-off tomorrow.”

Groaning, I set the fork down on my empty plate. “I thought that was next week.”

Nellie shook her head. “Don’t try that with me. You promised you’d help me with the petting zoo for the kids. Meet me at my place at six so we can get everyone loaded.”

“Fine.” I drew in a deep breath through my nose. I’d planned on clearing a few of the fire trails this weekend. Instead, I’d be trying to corral Nellie’s motley crew of rescue animals all day tomorrow.

“Oh, and I almost forgot,” Nellie said. “I’ve got a huckleberry cobbler made up for you boys for dessert tonight. You can take it now and warm it up yourselves or stop by on your way to Trail Supper and I can have it ready for you.”

“You spoil us, Nellie.” My mouth watered with the promise of homemade cobbler. The woman might spend too much time meddling where she shouldn’t, but no one would ever go hungry with Nellie around.

She set her hand on my shoulder and held my gaze. Her blue eyes held nothing but love. “Someone needs to, Thatcher.”

“I can swing by and grab it after I drop Lane off at the babysitter’s.” Holt reached for my coffee mug again. This time, I let him drain it.

“I’ll have it ready at six.” Nellie pulled her hand back and reached for my mug. “You want some more coffee to take with you?”

“I’m good for now.” I pulled out my wallet to settle up before I headed over to grab my supplies.

“I’ll take some, Nellie.” Holt gave her a tired smile.

It wasn’t my place to tell him how to handle things at home, but the guy needed to catch a break.

I helped out with Lane as much as I could, but he needed someone more permanent, maybe even someone live-in if he wanted to get a good night’s sleep in the next ten years.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Nellie said. “I’ve got someone staying at the Hideaway this weekend. She’s a writer.”

“A writer, huh?” Instantly suspicious, I cast a quick glance over at Holt. He was busy scrolling through his phone, oblivious to the fact that Nellie might have just handed us our first clue as to who might’ve written the stupid blog post.

“She’s doing a piece on the top hidden gem vacation rentals in Montana and The Huckleberry Hideaway made the list. Who knows what kind of publicity might come from that.” Nellie looked pleased as punch at the idea that her little vacation rental might draw a whole lot of attention to Hard Timber.

“Great. That’s just what we need... more outsiders hanging around.” My acreage butted up to Nellie’s land, which made me the closest neighbor to her rental cabin. She’d only had it open about a year, and I’d already had several folks stumble onto my property after getting lost.

“Be nice to her, Thatcher. I want to make a good impression. We could all use a little fresh blood around here, don’t you think?” Her eyes crinkled at the edges, then she actually winked at me before picking up my plate and disappearing into the kitchen.

“Tell her to watch out for my ‘No Trespassing’ signs,” I called after her.

Holt laughed. “Knowing Nellie, she’ll probably go out and take down all the signs before the woman checks in. She’s been trying to match all of us up for years.”

“Trying,” I said. “Not succeeding. This writer’s probably an old, retired English teacher who’s just making a little extra cash while funding her travels.”

I looked around the restaurant as I slid out of the booth.

A couple of Nellie’s friends sitting on the other side of the room glanced up and started whispering.

They could have been talking about anything, but I got the sense they were gossiping about me based on the way they giggled behind their menus.

Holt slid his sunglasses on as we exited the cafe. “This Ex-List thing is going to blow over, right?”

I stopped on the sidewalk, my attention zeroed in on a woman sliding out of a car right across the street.

She had on a denim jacket and a flowy skirt over cowboy boots that looked like they’d never seen a speck of dirt.

Long brown hair flowed over her shoulders and down her back.

She closed the door, then turned my way.

Something inside me snapped. I didn’t know who she was, where she came from or what she was doing in my tiny corner of the world. But I did know one thing... she was meant to be mine.

“Thatch?” Holt’s elbow nudged my ribs. “You okay, man?”

Reluctantly, I shifted my attention back to my brother. “Yeah.”

He followed my line of sight to where the woman had started to cross to our side of the street. “Who the hell is that?”

My gut prickled at the interest in his tone. What the fuck was wrong with me? I had no right to the curvy brunette. It didn’t make sense, but the closer she got, the more convinced I became that she was here for me. “I don’t know, but I’m sure as hell going to find out.”

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JOELY

It felt so good to get out of the car and stretch my legs even though the sun hadn't quite made it over the mountains yet, and the air still held a morning chill.

I'd driven through the night to get to Hard Timber and was ready to grab the key to the cute little cabin I'd rented and settle in before exploring the area.

Shops and buildings lined both sides of the main street in town with cute names like The Knotty Tap, Hard & Handy Supply Co.

, and The Huckleberry Cafe, where I was supposed to meet someone named Nellie and pick up the key.

Hard Timber was my last stop for the freelance article I was writing about hidden gem vacation rentals.

I'd only stayed a day or two in the other towns, but I'd booked Nellie's cabin for a week so I could finish my article and submit it before figuring out where to go next.

That was the thing about having my career blow up in my face a couple of months ago.

I didn't have an office to get back to or a boss ready to hand me my next assignment.

It was up to me to figure out how to make my own way, and I was terrified.

Faking a confidence I didn't feel, I glanced at the two massive men standing on the sidewalk outside of the cafe and smiled. I'd learned it was best to get off on the right foot in a town the size of Hard Timber. The locals were more willing to talk to me when I was friendly and open.

"Good morning." My stomach did back flips as I passed.

The tall one looked like he'd just stepped out of an ad for lumberjacks.

With dark hair, a full beard covering the lower half of his face, and narrowed eyes that looked like they didn't miss a beat, he embodied the spirit of a grumpy mountain man.

I even caught a whiff of pine and wood smoke drifting off his plaid flannel shirt.

"Morning," he mumbled back.

With just one word, his deep, gravelly tone rumbled through me. I almost stumbled on the step leading into the cafe. Obviously, it had been too long since I'd shared the company of a man, especially one as gruff and grumbly as him. Regaining my composure, I pulled the door open.

Walking into the cafe felt like being hugged by an old friend. Coffee percolated behind the counter, an old Johnny Cash song crackled through the speakers, and the scent of pancakes and syrup tickled my nose.

"You must be Joely." A petite, gray-haired woman with a pencil tucked behind her ear stood behind a cash register that looked even older than she was. "I'm Nellie. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

I'd planned on just grabbing the key, but a cup of coffee sure sounded good. "That

would be great. Thank you.”

“Just slide onto a stool, hon.” Nellie grabbed a mug and filled it to the brim. “It’s so nice to meet you, and I’m just thrilled you’re including The Huckleberry Hideaway on your list.”

I wrapped my hands around the mug, warming my fingers. “Thanks for having me. I’m excited to check out your place. It’s the first one I’ve stayed at that has its own mini petting zoo.”

Nellie flushed as she rested a hip against the counter. “It’s more like a collection of lost souls that need a place to live out their days.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to meeting them.

” I reached for a container of cream and stirred a little into my coffee.

Like most small-town diners, The Huckleberry Cafe made their coffee strong enough to wake up Rip van Winkle.

While I added half a packet of sugar, I swiveled on my stool to glance out the front window.

To check the weather, I lied to myself. It’s not like I was looking to see if Paul Bunyan was still standing outside.

Nellie caught me. “The taller one is Thatcher. Grumpier than a barn cat in a bubble bath, but he’s got a good heart. The other one is Holt. He’s on our local fire crew and has the cutest little boy.”

“Oh.” It was my turn to blush. My cheeks heated like they’d been kissed by the sun.

“I was just checking the weather.”

“Mmm hmm.” Nellie smiled to herself. “Now, what’ll you have for breakfast? I’ll pack up some muffins and scones for tomorrow, but since you’re here, I want to send you off with a full belly.”

I hadn’t even looked at a menu, but a man sitting a few stools away had just dug into a huge pile of French toast. I nodded toward him. “That sure looks good.”

“Good choice. Huckleberry stuffed French toast. It’s one of the best things on the menu. I’ll have that out to you in a flash.” She disappeared into the kitchen, leaving me to look around and get a feel for the place.

The little cafe was exactly what I expected based on the other small mountain towns I’d visited over the past two weeks.

About a dozen booths lined the back wall and tables set for two, four, or six sat in front of the large front window.

Bright push pins held announcements on a bulletin board by the front door.

Two ceiling fans lazily spun above, just fast enough to circulate the air.

I glanced back at the window, hoping I might catch another glimpse of the guy she’d called Thatcher, but he was gone.

My chest tightened, but it was for the best. I needed to focus on my article and figure out my next steps.

And while I didn’t know where I might end up, there was no room in my life for a grumpy mountain man.

Not even one as attractive as the flannel-clad hottie.

Before I finished my first cup of coffee, Nellie was back with a pile of French toast stacked so high I wondered if I might become gluten-intolerant by just smelling it. She waited until I took the first bite before refilling my mug and taking off with the carafe of coffee in hand.

When I'd stuffed my belly past the point of comfortably full, Nellie packed the rest of my breakfast in a to-go container, handed me a bag full of something that smelled like fresh-baked heaven, and slid a key across the counter.

"Here you go. My number's on the keyring. Call if you have questions." She waved off the money I tried to hand her. "Breakfast is part of your stay. Come back tomorrow and you can try our mountain skillet and check out the farmer's market kick-off."

I was always looking for more local flavor to add to my story. "That sounds interesting. Is it an all-day thing?"

"It goes from seven until two. We'll have local artisans, fresh produce, and even a few of my animals there. You'll have to stop by. Everyone in town will probably walk through at some point." Her brow arched slightly. "You will come, won't you?"

"Sounds great. I'll see you then." I picked up the bag, the takeout container, and my purse and made my way back to the car.

The temperature had warmed up a little since I'd gone inside.

I tucked everything into the car and drove through the middle of town, following my GPS to the cabin.

When I'd booked it, the listing warned that it was almost at the end of a dead-end road, but I wasn't prepared for the deep ruts that made my car rattle and shake.

I finally pulled into the drive of an adorable cottage that looked like it belonged in a fairy tale.

It was tucked against the base of the mountain where wildflowers gave way to tall, dense pine trees.

Planters full of purple and white blooms hung from the railing of the front porch.

Their sweet scent mingled with the smell of damp earth as I got out and looked around.

A family of ducks waddled down the drive and a miniature horse whinnied from a paddock behind the cottage. The porch held two heavy wooden rocking chairs... the perfect place to sip my morning coffee. I walked toward the bright purple door, eager to look inside.

It didn't disappoint. The inside was even more charming.

Whitewashed wooden walls held colorful framed prints of flower-covered hills.

I stepped into the cozy living area, anchored by a large wood-burning stove in the corner.

An overstuffed couch sat on the opposite wall with a fantastic view of the mountains right out the window.

I carried my bag up the spiral staircase to the bedroom where Nellie had left a vase of wildflowers next to the bed. Out of all the places I'd stayed, The Huckleberry

Hideaway was already my favorite.

I should have been ready for a nice, long nap, but I felt the need to walk off some of the French toast before crawling into bed. So, I changed into a pair of shorts and a tank top, grabbed a long-sleeved button down to shrug on over my shoulders, and laced up my hiking boots.

Since I'd come in on the road, I already knew what I'd see if I headed back in the same direction.

I grabbed my notebook, favorite pen, and a trail map Nellie had left, shoved them into my backpack, and took a right out of the drive.

The road curved around a bend ahead, and I wondered what I might find.

Before I made it too far, footsteps sounded on the road behind me. I turned to find a black and white goat trotting toward me. Figuring it must be one of Nellie's, I waited for it to catch up.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked, not expecting an answer. "Did you get out, or does she let you have free rein?"

The goat stared up at me with big blue eyes, its jaw slowing moving back and forth like it was chewing a big wad of bubble gum. A light blue collar circled its neck, and I stepped close enough to read the silver tag that dangled in front.

"Hi, Gene." I flipped the tag over to find Nellie's name and phone number on the back. "I don't know if you're allowed to be out here. What do you think?"

It nodded its head and let out a soft Baaaaaaa .

“Why don’t you go on home?” The last thing I needed was to go hiking with a goat.

Gene slowly blinked, then turned and trotted back down the drive.

“That’s a good goat,” I called after him.

Waiting until he disappeared around the corner of the cottage, I checked the trail map for a relatively short hike.

Looked like there was one just a couple hundred yards ahead.

Based on the map, I estimated the whole hike should take me less than an hour and wear me out enough to come back and sleep through the rest of the morning.

I took a sip of water and set off again, invigorated by the fresh mountain air. Birds chirped from the tree branches, and I caught a glimpse of bright blue sky overhead. The mountains of Montana were a world away from the Chicago skyscrapers I’d left behind.

I thought about what my ex-co-workers might be doing right now.

Probably fighting traffic on their way in or out of the city or sweating their butts off on a coffee run.

I’d be lying to myself if I said I didn’t miss it.

But I couldn’t stay. Not after the stunt my boss pulled that turned my whole world upside down.

Feeling sorry for myself wasn’t going to solve anything.

I looked around for something bright and beautiful to pull me out of my funk.

A cluster of pink wildflowers bloomed in a clearing just off the trail ahead.

I stepped through the long grass to reach them and snapped a few pictures, trying to line up a shot to get the mountains in the background.

“Can’t you read?” A gruff voice snapped from the edge of the trees.

I turned toward the sound, all of my senses on high alert. The flannel-clad mountain man I’d seen outside the cafe stood a few yards in front of me. Muscular arms covered in tattoos crossed over his broad chest and the edges of his lips turned down in a scowl.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” I probably should have been scared, but my gut told me he wasn’t interested in hurting me. I’d always trusted my instincts before. Now would be a really bad time for them to fail me.

“I asked if you can read.” He pointed to a No Trespassing sign nailed to a tree. “I’m assuming you can’t, since you clearly didn’t pay any attention to the signs I posted.”

“I’m just stretching my legs and taking a few pictures.” I waited for him to speak, but he stared at me like I’d just committed a felony instead of overlooking a few signs. “I’m staying at The Huckleberry?—”

“I know. Nellie told me.” Irritation rolled off him. Nellie hadn’t been kidding when she said he was a grump.

“I’m Joely.” Hoping a smile and a handshake might thaw the iceberg in front of me, I moved closer and stuck out my hand.

He looked at it for a long beat, then reluctantly gripped my hand in his. “Thatcher.”

Goosebumps popped up along my arms as we touched.

His palm felt rough against mine, like he worked with his hands for a living.

For a split second, I imagined what they might feel like running over my skin.

Then he pulled his hand away. The scowl returned, though slightly less scowly. Maybe I was making progress.

“Do you live around here?” More curious than alarmed, I wanted to learn what I could about this man who had the power to make me feel things I hadn’t felt in a very long time... things I had no business feeling in the mountains of Montana.

He shook his head. “I’m not doing this.”

“Not doing what?” He acted like I’d offended him, but all I’d done was ask a question.

“The property line’s back there.” He jabbed a thick finger toward a tree a couple dozen feet behind me. One of his No Trespassing signs was nailed at eye level. “You stay on that side and everything will be fine.”

If he hadn’t looked so serious, I might have laughed. “So much for small-town hospitality.”

He didn’t respond. Just stood there with his arms at his sides like he was waiting for me to retreat and leave him alone.

“Fine.” I put my hands up and backed away. “Relax, Paul Bunyan. I’m not here to

steal your axe. Just wanted to find a good trail to walk off some of Nellie's stuffed French toast."

His frown faded just a smidge. "There's a trail behind Nellie's cabin that'll take you to a private lake. Just follow it until it splits and stay to the left. You can't miss it."

"That wasn't so difficult, was it?"

His eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Acting like a human being instead of a tree stump." I flashed him a grateful smile and turned around to head back the way I'd come. I'd save my hike for another day. My interaction with the grumpy lumbersnack had already worn me out.

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THATCHER

Helping Nellie set up her menagerie of animals during the Farmer's Market Kick Off was my personal version of hell.

She always asked me for favors during my weakest moments, like right after she dropped by with a fresh huckleberry pie or when she crashed Friday night trail suppers with the guys and brought along enough homemade chocolate chip cookies to last us all night.

I couldn't remember when she'd strong-armed me into helping this time, but I had a long record of being sweet-talked by Nellie. Pretty much everyone in town did.

"That should do it." Nellie brushed her palms against her jeans. "Just holler if you need me."

We'd just finished setting up the portable pens and getting all of her four-legged and feathered friends settled.

The other vendors were still busy unloading trucks and setting up their stands.

I figured I had about fifteen more minutes before the early birds arrived and started wandering around the vendor stalls.

That gave me just enough time to grab a cup of coffee to go and head out of town.

"What do you mean 'holler if you need me'?" I asked.

“I’m short on waitstaff this morning. You’ll have to handle things by yourself out here.” Nellie arched her brows and leveled me with one of her no-nonsense looks. One that said I wasn’t going anywhere.

“I’m supposed to be clearing trails today.

I don’t have time to sit in a tent and tell kids not to piss off your porcupine.

” My lungs squeezed tight as I thought about all those people looking at me, wondering if there was any truth to me being called out as the ghost of Hard Timber.

I still hadn’t figured out who was behind the damn post, but I’d talked about it with the guys last night and we had a few suspects.

“Percy won’t give anyone any trouble,” Nellie said. “He’s just like you. All bark and no bite.”

“Porcupines don’t bark, and I’m not worried about him biting someone,” I snapped.

“Oh, you know what I mean. His quills are just for show. He wouldn’t hurt a thing.” She picked up a skunk she’d recently nursed back to health and handed it to me. “Fabio here gets a little nervous, though. I’d keep him close by. We don’t want anyone to get sprayed.”

The skunk nuzzled between my unbuttoned flannel and the white tee I had on underneath, burrowing into my side. “You brought a skunk?”

“Just sit down and let him get comfortable. I’ll be right back with a thermos of coffee and a cinnamon roll for you.”

I remained standing, ready to go toe-to-toe with her over this. “I can’t stay, Nellie.

I've got things to do."

She pulled herself up to her full height of about four-foot-ten and tapped her finger against my chest. "Thatcher Thorne, you listen to me. It's that kind of attitude that landed you and those other boys on that list in the first place.

You might not care what people think about you, but some of those boys do.

They look up to you. Set a good example for a change.

Your mama loved being part of this town and it would break her heart to see how isolated you've become. "

I gritted my teeth and forced the feelings bubbling up inside my chest back in their box. "That's low, Nellie. Bringing my mom into the conversation?"

Nellie's shoulders sagged, and she set her hand on my arm. "I'm sorry, sugar. It hurts to think about her, but it's true."

It had been a long time since I'd allowed myself to think about my mom, and I wasn't going to let myself go there while holding a fucking skunk and standing in the middle of town.

"I'll stay until you can find someone else to take over," I ground out between clenched teeth. "And I want a whole box of cinnamon rolls, not just one. Extra frosting."

She bit back her smile. "Thank you, Thatcher."

"Don't thank me. Just find someone to take my place." I ran my hand over Fabio's back. I'd seen my fair share of skunks before, but I'd never pet one. His hair was

much softer than I expected. Almost like petting a rabbit.

I sat down on the camping chair Nellie brought and talked to the little stink bomb while I waited for her to come back with my breakfast.

“How did a guy like you end up in a place like this, man?” I gently tugged Fabio out of my shirt and held him up to get a better look. One of his legs looked like it had been chewed up in a trap. “Did you get stuck somewhere, buddy?”

While I checked over the skunk, a woman laughed across the street.

I looked up, my gaze locking onto Nellie’s renter.

She stood at a booth selling handmade soap and candles.

She’d tied her hair back in a ponytail and had on a pair of jeans that hugged her ass like they’d been painted on.

The farmer’s market kick-off brought in folks from all over, so I wasn’t surprised that I didn’t recognize the vendor.

I watched while she chatted with the guy operating the stand, my gut twisting as he smiled at her.

There it was again... that low, hungry ache I didn’t know what to do with.

It didn’t make sense, but I wanted her. Wanted to be the one making her laugh like she didn’t have a worry in the world.

Wanted to fist my hand in that long hair of hers and tilt her head back so I could claim her mouth with mine.

I couldn't stand watching the guy brush his fingers against hers as he handed her another candle to smell, but I also couldn't look away.

"Joely seems to be settling in just fine." Nellie came up behind me and set a thermos and brown box on the table. "Have the two of you met yet? Seems only right, since she's staying next door."

"Yeah, I ran into her yesterday afternoon." I set Fabio in my lap and tried not to think about how rude I'd been when I caught her trespassing.

"Good." Nellie smiled at me, then lifted her hand to wave and call out to Joely. "Good morning, hon. Come on over and grab a cinnamon roll."

For fuck's sake. I needed another run-in with the curvy brunette just about as much as I needed a spa day.

My throat went bone dry as Joely crossed the street.

I stood with the skunk still in my arms and braced myself for another face-to-face interaction with the woman who'd haunted my dreams last night.

"Hi Nellie." Her lips split into a wide grin. The woman was like a ray of sunshine wherever she went. "Looks like you brought the whole crew out today. I haven't met all of them yet."

Nellie nudged me forward. "You've met Thatcher though, right? His cabin is just down the road from the Hideaway. I wouldn't be surprised if the two of you ran into each other quite a bit while you're there."

"Hey." Joely's smile faded a bit as she shot me a quick glance before reaching over to pet the goat.

“Morning,” I grumbled.

Even though the tension underneath the small tent was thick enough to choke a horse, Nellie didn’t miss a beat. “I need to get back inside, but Thatcher can introduce you to everyone. He’s also got cinnamon rolls. Help yourself. I hope you’ll stop by the cafe before you head back to the cabin.”

“Thank you. A cinnamon roll sounds fantastic.” Joely looked over at me, her eyes slightly narrowed. “Though Thatcher doesn’t look like he wants to share.”

“You don’t have to worry about Thatcher. He’s built like a grizzly bear, but just as sweet as a little koala, aren’t you?” Nellie even had the nerve to pat my back as she walked away.

“Have you ever held a koala?” Joely asked, her eyes full of innocent curiosity.

Pissed off that I’d been called “sweet,” I clenched my jaw. “No, but they’ve got claws and sharp teeth.”

She continued to pet the goat. “They can also carry chlamydia. It’s probably best to avoid them if you come across one in the wild.”

“I don’t have chlamydia,” I mumbled. The sooner I got rid of Joely, the better.

She had an inexplicable unnerving effect on me, and I didn’t know how to handle myself around her.

The more time I spent around her, the more I started forgetting why I wanted to be alone in the first place. “Do you want a cinnamon roll or not?”

“Wow. With an offer like that, how could I refuse? Got any hand sanitizer?”

I bent down and dug a bottle of hand sanitizer out of the bag Nellie left while I continued to cradle Fabio. “Here.”

“Thanks.” She pumped some into her palm and rubbed her hands together. “About that cinnamon roll...”

“Help yourself.” I nudged the box toward her, hoping she’d take a roll and leave. Instead, she picked up the one with the most frosting and sat down in the chair I’d abandoned.

“How long have you lived in Hard Timber?” Glancing up at me, she bit into the roll like we were two civilized people who were just having a normal conversation, maybe even friends.

When I didn’t answer right away, she rolled her eyes.

“Do you have something against me personally or are you this charming around everyone?”

“Hey, Uncle Thatcher!” My six-year-old nephew saved me from saying something I might regret.

“Hey, Lane. Where’s your dad?” I crouched down to give him a one-armed hug, being careful not to squish Fabio while I looked around for my brother Holt.

“Over there.” Lane pointed to a tent a few booths over where his dad stood talking to the elementary school principal who also ran a side gig making all kinds of jerky. Then he turned his attention back to Joely, his forehead furrowed. “Who are you?”

She saved me from having to come up with something to say by introducing herself. Shifting her cinnamon roll to one hand, she held out the other for Lane to shake. “Hi,

I'm Joely. It's nice to meet you."

Lane shook her hand and eyed her cinnamon roll. "Is that one of Miss Nellie's?"

"Sure is. Do you want one?" Joely lifted the edge of the box and pushed it toward my nephew, offering him one of my rolls. They were going to be gone before I even got to taste one.

"Can I?" Lane looked up at me, already reaching for the box.

"As long as it's okay with your dad."

Holt walked up and put a hand on Lane's shoulder. "What's he trying to talk you into now?"

"A cinnamon roll, Dad. That's Joely, and she said I could have one." Lane pointed to Joely with one hand and grabbed hold of a cinnamon roll with the other.

"Use the hand sanitizer first." I pushed it toward him. No telling what he'd been into already this morning. The kid spent most of his time digging around in the dirt, hoping to uncover a bunch of dinosaur bones. He was only six and already knew he wanted to be a paleontologist when he grew up.

Holt lifted a brow and tilted his head toward Joely, his way of asking me what the fuck was going on.

"Joely, this is my brother, Holt." I wasn't used to making introductions, but it was too awkward to just sit there and stare at each other. "He's on the fire crew around here and manages the tower outside of town."

She wiped the corner of her lip with a napkin and gave Holt a smile that should have

knocked the socks right off a regular guy. But Holt had made that fucking list as well. I couldn't remember the nickname they gave him, but he hadn't looked twice at a woman since Lane's mom walked out on him.

"Nice to meet you." With his hand still on Lane's shoulder, he turned his son to face me. "What do you say to Uncle Thatcher?"

"Thanks for the cinnamon roll." With a mouth full of his first bite, Lane pointed to the lump under my shirt. "What's that?"

"This is Fabio." I pulled the skunk away from my body and held him out so Lane could see.

As soon as I did, the PA system set up in front of the courthouse let out a screech so high-pitched it could have made someone's ears bleed.

Fabio hissed, lifted his tail, and a stream of foul-smelling, eye-burning liquid shot out of his butt and onto my sleeve.

That would have been bad enough, but I shifted as the spray hit, sending it past me and directly onto Joely.

I froze as she jumped out of the chair. Fabio flip-flopped in my arms, landing on the pavement and breaking into a dead run down the middle of Main Street.

For a split second, Joely and I looked at each other. Then she took off after Fabio. With no choice but to follow, I took off after her, calling back to my brother as my boots pounded on the pavement. "Keep an eye on the other animals."

Trusting him to handle the tent, I sped up, easily overtaking Joely as Fabio ran between two buildings.

Nellie would strangle me if she lost one of her critters, though I wasn't exactly in a big hurry to get my hands on that skunk again.

I could barely breathe through the stench that surrounded me.

In all my years hiking through the mountains, I'd never found myself on the wrong end of a skunk.

He ran through the doorway of the Hard & Handy as a customer came out. My buddy Trace owned the place and would shit bricks if a skunk sprayed any of his customers inside.

"Hey, Thatcher. What's going on?" Trace yelled as I followed Fabio right down the candy aisle.

"Nothing." I stopped while Fabio paused to check out the bottom shelf. A package of Whoppers had caught his eye, or more specifically, his nose. He sniffed the air, his nose twitching, then dove onto the shelf.

Joely caught up, her chest heaving while she tried to catch her breath. "He's a fast little guy, isn't he?"

I put my finger to my lips and signaled her to be quiet.

Then I got down on my hands and knees, gesturing for her to do the same.

Fabio crouched at the back of the shelf, nibbling on a piece of candy.

Hoping Joely could interpret my hand gestures, I signaled her to be ready as I went in for the grab.

With my heart pumping so much adrenaline through me that my hand shook, I reached out and caught Fabio with one hand.

“What the hell is this?” Trace stood over me, hands on his hips.

“Crisis averted. One of Nellie’s animals got out.” I tucked Fabio under my flannel shirt.

Trace squinted and pinched his nose. “You smell like?—”

“I know. Trace, meet Joely. She’s staying at Nellie’s cabin.”

Joely got up and held out her hand.

Trace shook his head and took a step back. “No offense, but could you both please get the hell out of here?”

“Of course.” Joely let her hand fall to her side. “No offense taken. Maybe we’ll meet again under better circumstances.”

“I don’t think I have an air freshener strong enough,” Trace said as he backed away. “Can you go out the back?”

“Yeah. Sorry, man.” I glanced at Joely and nodded toward the door to the storage room. “Follow me.”

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JOELY

“You owe me a cinnamon roll. I never got to finish mine.” I sat in the front seat of Thatcher’s truck with the windows wide open.

As soon as we’d taken Fabio back to the tent, Nellie handed us each a blanket to wrap up in to try to contain the stench and sent us back to Thatcher’s with a huge bottle of something she called her “homemade de-skunking magic.”

“I never even got to start mine,” he said. “Knowing my nephew, they’re probably already all gone.”

“How old is he?” I asked, hoping to get a real conversation going. So far, he’d mostly answered my questions in grunts and grumbles.

“Six. He’s like a human garbage disposal, though.” Thatcher looked over, meeting my gaze for a split second before turning his eyes back to the road. “I don’t know where he puts it.”

“And he’s your brother’s kid?”

“Yeah. Holt’s a year younger than me and my brother Dane is a year younger than him. I’ve got a sister, too. Jessa’s the baby of the family.”

I’d never say that being sprayed by a skunk was a good thing, but something had shifted between me and the grumpy mountain man. Like he’d let down his guard a little. Not much, but at least enough to act like a regular human. And he was actually

kind of cute when he wasn't frowning.

"Your poor mother. Three boys that close together couldn't have been easy." I let out a soft laugh.

"My mom's dead," he said, his voice flat. And just like that, whatever defenses he'd let down slid right back into place.

"I'm so sorry." Biting down on my lip, I wished I could take back what I'd said. It wasn't the first time I'd opened my mouth and inserted my entire foot. With the way things were going between the two of us, it probably wouldn't be the last.

The truck bounced over the rutted dirt road as we neared Thatcher's cabin.

Nellie said that would be the best place to go since he had a creek running through his property and we could easily scrub the skunk smell off of us there.

But the closer we got, the more I wondered whether it was a good idea to go to his place.

I wasn't worried about something bad happening, I just didn't want to make things worse between us.

"Maybe you should drop me off where I'm staying," I said as we neared the turnoff for The Huckleberry Hideaway.

"Why? There's no outdoor water spigot. You want the whole place to smell like you do?"

That was a valid point, but I could figure something out. "No. I just don't want to impose."

“It’s fine.” The words coming out of his mouth didn’t match his body language. His hands clenched the steering wheel, and I could have cut glass against the hard set of his jaw.

“Are you sure?”

“Do you need a hand-delivered personal invitation?”

Before I could decide whether he was joking or not, we passed the turn off to the cabin.

For better or worse, we were stuck with each other for now.

My stomach tightened, and I tried to tamp down my anxiety.

As Thatcher pulled into a narrow drive, a big dog ambled toward the truck.

Tail wagging, tongue lolling out of its mouth, it looked friendly enough.

“That’s Bear. He won’t hurt you.”

The name fit since the dog was the size of a small grizzly. As I climbed down from the truck, Bear backed away. “Wow. Not even your dog wants to be around us.”

“Can you blame him?” Thatcher stepped onto the small front porch. “I’m going to grab a couple of towels. The creek’s just down the trail over there.”

He pointed at a narrow path leading through the trees.

“I can wait for you.”

“Figured you might want to get undressed in private.”

My cheeks immediately heated. “Oh. I guess I’ll meet you over there then.”

Clutching the blanket around me, I left Thatcher on the porch and headed toward the path. Bear followed a safe distance behind. Thatcher’s place looked exactly like I’d imagined, like he’d cut down the trees and built his cabin with his bare hands. He probably had.

Bear must have gotten tired of going so slow. He ran ahead, leading the way to the creek. As I passed through the last of the trees, the view stopped me in my tracks. Snowcapped mountains towered above, a stunning backdrop to the crystal-clear water of the creek cutting through the woods.

I took in a long, deep breath and instantly regretted it. My nose filled with skunk smell, and I coughed. The sooner I scrubbed it away, the better.

Thatcher had called it a creek, but it looked more like a narrow river to me.

Water flowed between the banks slowly and steady, so clear I could see the rocks lining the bottom.

I tossed the blanket from my shoulders and kicked off my boots.

Bear didn’t waste any time. He plunged straight into the water, splashing icy cold droplets all over me.

“He loves the water,” Thatcher said as he came up behind me.

“It’s freezing. Are you really going to get in there?” I shivered just thinking about stepping into the creek. There had to be another way... a warm way to scrub skunk

smell off of me.

“It’s good for you. Mother Nature’s original cold plunge.” He tossed two towels over a low tree branch then pulled his shirt over his head.

My stomach plummeted to my feet. The man had the kind of abs I’d only seen in magazines. There didn’t seem to be an extra ounce of fat anywhere. In awe, I wrapped my arms around my middle, totally self-conscious of the extra weight I carried.

He didn’t stop there. As he turned around to face the creek, he undid the button of his jeans then slid them all the way down his legs.

If he was wearing underwear, those went with his pants.

I couldn’t look away. My eyes were glued to his amazing glutes.

I’d never seen such human perfection in the flesh.

Then, calmly and casually like we were just taking a regular afternoon dip, he stepped into the water and walked toward the middle of the creek.

I tried to swallow but my mouth had gone bone dry.

“Hey, will you toss me a washcloth and Nellie’s scrub?” Thatcher headed back toward the bank.

Before he stepped out of the waist deep water and scrambled my brain, I grabbed what he needed. “I’ve got it.”

He easily caught the items I tossed, even though my throw wasn’t exactly spot on. It

was hard to aim when all I could think about was how much I'd seen of him. And even worse, how hot and bothered it had made me feel.

"Thanks. You coming in?"

"Um... I don't know." There were too many factors working against me. Like the water was so cold I might freeze to death. Or more importantly, I didn't want a man with the body of a Greek god to see my cellulite-covered thighs.

"Joely." The way he said my name hit me low in the gut. It was part scolding, part demand, but definitely wasn't a question. "If you want to smell like skunk, that's fine with me. It ought to wear off by itself in a couple months."

A couple months? Ugh. Why had I taken this assignment? I should have stayed in the city where the worst thing I could get sprayed with was a rogue sprinkler.

"I'll just wait until you're finished." That would be better. He could take his chiseled self back to his cabin, and I'd have the whole creek to myself.

He shook his head like he couldn't believe I didn't want to get naked with him.

Then he lathered up with Nellie's scrub and spent the next ten minutes scrubbing every inch of his kissed-by-the-sun skin.

I sat down on the stinky blanket, pulled my legs up and rested my chin on my knees while I tried not to stare as the washcloth glided over his tanned arms and broad shoulders.

When he was done, he walked right out of the water like he didn't have a care in the world, grabbed a towel, and secured it around his waist. Water droplets glistened on his chest. The situation was so over the top, I almost wanted to laugh.

I imagined the titles I could use for my article.

“The best way to get a mountain man naked” or “What’s really underneath the flannel of Montana’s mountain men. ”

Neither of those angles would land me on the list for a coveted journalistic award, though my chances of that imploded when my career went off the rails.

“Your turn.” Thatcher’s deep voice dragged my attention back to the creek, reminding me I was still covered in skunk stink. “You want me to wait to make sure nothing happens?”

“I’m pretty sure I can handle it.” Now that he was semi-covered, it seemed safe enough to look him in the eye.

“Alright.” He rolled his things up in the blanket and held it away from his skin. “I’m going to go get dressed. I’ll bring you something to put on after you get out.”

Something to put on... my pulse spiked. I’d been so preoccupied by taking my clothes off that I hadn’t given any thought to what I’d put on after a dip in the creek. Unless I wanted to walk back to the cabin in a towel, I’d be wearing something of Thatcher’s. “Thanks. That would be great.”

He nodded and headed down the trail leading back to his cabin. Bear jumped out of the creek to follow, but Thatcher turned back and pointed at him. “Stay here.”

The dog slowly moved toward me then dropped down to his belly and rested his huge head on his paws.

“He’ll keep an eye on you while you clean up,” Thatcher said. Without another word, he disappeared down the path, leaving me alone.

First, I peeled off my jeans, then my shirt. I lifted the strap of my sports bra, hoping the skunk smell hadn't soaked in, but it smelled just as bad as everything else. Groaning, I tossed my bra and my underwear onto the blanket, grabbed the scrub and a washcloth, and dipped my toe into the water.

It probably would have been warmer stepping into the Arctic Ocean.

My teeth started to chatter as I forced myself to move toward the middle of the creek.

As quickly as possible, I ducked under the water then scrubbed every inch of my skin and hair with Nellie's skunk scrub.

My fingers were so cold they'd gone numb, and I stumbled on the rocks on the bottom of the creek as I rinsed off and made my way back to the bank.

One second, I was standing upright then my foot slipped on a slimy rock.

My head went under, and I struggled to get my footing on the slick bottom.

The current hadn't felt very strong when I had my feet under me but now it swept me along.

I couldn't end like this, drowning in four feet of ice-cold mountain spring water.

Bear ran along the bank, his barks echoing off the mountains. I gasped for air before I got pulled under again, my fingers scraping roots and rotten wood, searching for something to hold onto.

Then strong arms locked around me, holding me in place. The creek flowed around Thatcher as he stood in the center of it like a boulder. He picked me up like I didn't weigh any more than a feather and carried me back to where he'd left the towels.

I was too cold and way too embarrassed to say a word. With my arms crossed over my boobs, I tried to make myself as small as possible.

Maybe this was just a bad dream. A horrible, awful nightmare that I'd wake up from any second.

I pinched myself and winced. No, this was definitely happening.

I'd been plucked out of a shallow creek, as naked as the day I was born, and hauled back to safety by a man who looked like he could split mountains in half with his bare hands.

Speaking of those hands, as my skin thawed, I could feel one pressing against my upper arm, not too far from my right breast. Tingles raced through me and heat pooled in my core.

Thatcher bent down with me still in his arms and grabbed a towel.

He tossed it over me and headed down the trail to his cabin.

Looked like I was going home with the mountain man.

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THATCHER

I was fucked. Not just a little fucked, but totally, irreparably fucked now that I'd seen every perfect inch of Joely.

Not to mention how it had felt to have my hands on her soft skin and to have her curves pressed against me.

Thank fuck she'd been so startled when I pulled her out of the creek that she hadn't noticed how hard I'd been.

Now she sat at the table, her hands wrapped around one of my mugs, her thick hips covered in a pair of my sweats, and her nipples taut against one of my t-shirts.

I ran my fingers through my hair wondering how my life had come to this.

For a man who tried to avoid any and all unnecessary interactions, I'd been rendered speechless by the curvy brunette.

And now that I knew what it felt like to hold her in my arms, I was already craving it again.

"Thanks for pulling me from the creek. Do you make a habit out of saving tourists?" She bit down on her bottom lip, embarrassed but still trying to make light of the situation.

"Not if I can help it. I usually stay to myself."

“If you’re going for a reclusive mountain man vibe, you’ve definitely nailed it.” She held out her mug to clink against mine.

I shook my head, unwilling to encourage her. It was going to be difficult enough to watch her walk away without giving in to her sunny disposition. “I’m not going for anything. Just being myself.”

She got up from her chair and wandered around the living room, pausing at the mantel where I had a few pictures of me with my siblings. “Is this your family?”

“Yeah.”

“And your parents?” She picked up a small, framed photo of my mom and dad on their wedding day. Back when they looked so young and hopeful, so totally unaware of the tragedy waiting for them down the road.

Seeing her touch my things felt like she was trespassing on my heart.

My chair scraped against the wooden floor as I got up and walked over to the fireplace.

I took the photo from her and set it back on the mantel face down.

I didn’t want her to go, but I also wasn’t sure I could handle having her in my space much longer.

“Once you’re warmed up, I can give you a ride back to Nellie’s cabin.”

She cocked her head and studied me. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“You’re not. I just don’t get many visitors.” Especially ones who made me want to rip off their clothes and take them on my kitchen table.

Her gaze shifted to a photo of me standing with the fire crew. Nellie’s husband Gunther knelt down in the front. “Are you a firefighter?”

“Not anymore. That was taken a long time ago.” I scanned the faces of the dozen men staring back at me.

We’d been part of a volunteer crew Gunther ran every summer.

Nellie gathered all the lost souls she could from the high school and Gunther gave us a purpose.

“That’s Nellie’s husband in the front. He used to have us clear trails in the summers.”

Joely didn’t say anything for a full minute, just studied the picture. Then she glanced back up at me. “You look different.”

I chuckled. “I was about forty pounds lighter back then.”

“Not just that.” Joely looked from me back to the photo. “You’re actually smiling.”

“Smiles aren’t as easy to come by nowadays.

” That was as much as I could tell her, or at least as much as I was willing to share.

She’d already gotten too close and taken way too much of an interest in my life.

I wasn’t used to it and wasn’t sure I liked it.

Being around her made me feel things I hadn't felt in years. Things like hope.

"Well, for what it's worth, you have a very nice smile." Her gaze lingered on the photo for a few more seconds, then she walked back to the table and set down her mug. "You don't have to drive me back to the cabin. I can walk from here."

Knots tightened in my gut at the compliment, but I ignored it. "I don't mind. Also, those pants are probably going to fall off before you make it down the drive."

I nodded at my sweats. She had them tied around her waist, but they still pooled at her feet.

"If you're sure you don't mind..." her voice trailed off.

I would have given a kidney to know what she was thinking, but I was too damn stubborn to ask. Or maybe I was afraid of how she might answer. Either way, I ignored the heat racing through my system and walked over to put my mug in the sink.

"Don't mind at all. I'll run your clothes through the wash with some of Nellie's scrub and bring them over when they're dry." It would give me another reason to see her.

"That's really not necessary."

"You don't have a washer and dryer at the cabin, and I don't mind."

"I grabbed my keys and held the door for her to pass."

The scent of my soap drifted off her skin as she walked by, and I struggled to keep from reaching for her.

I'd never had an issue staying in control, but something about Joely pushed me past my limit.

I needed to get her out of my cabin before I did something I'd definitely regret.

"You got me there." She stopped on my front porch and turned to face me. "Thanks for the rescue. For the clothes. For the coffee. I really appreciate it."

"It's not a big deal."

She reached up and put her palm on my chest. "It is to me. You're not nearly as grumpy and growly as you pretend to be, you know."

I wanted to slip my arm behind her back and jerk her against me. Fist my hand in her long dark hair and tip her chin back so I could devour her. Instead, I wrapped my fingers around hers and pulled them from my chest. "You don't know me well enough to make judgements like that, sweetpea."

The ice around my heart thawed as she stared up at me. I could see the stubborn glint in her eye as she decided how best to respond. My breath caught while I waited. If she pushed me any further, I wasn't sure I'd be able to resist her.

Finally, the edges of her mouth curled up in a slight smile. "I guess we'll have to see."

She walked to the truck, her ass swaying back and forth, leaving me standing on the porch with my heart in my throat.

I pulled myself together and followed, both eager to get her out of my space and wishing she'd never leave.

I'd never be able to sit at my table again without seeing the flash of her smile across from me.

Or stand by my fireplace without feeling her next to me.

In the space of twenty-four hours, everything had changed.

* * *

I'd dropped Joely off at the cabin and returned home.

The space felt smaller, almost suffocating without her in it.

With the threat of a thunderstorm heading toward Hard Timber, I decided to pack a bag and get back to what I'd been planning on doing before Nellie had talked me into helping her.

We hadn't had rain in a while and there was a bunch of dry brush on the trails that needed to be cleared.

Bear raced ahead, always thrilled to explore the variety of scents around the mountains. Usually, hard work was the best way to clear my head, but it wasn't working.

Thoughts of Joely spun around in my brain. The more I worked, the more images I conjured up. Joely laughing as the candle vendor flirted with her... the vulnerability in her eyes as I cradled her against my chest... the way she smiled at me as she put her palm over my heart.

Fuck. It was too much. For a man who prided himself on his ability to not feel a damn thing, I didn't know what to do. My phone buzzed against my thigh, saving me from

trying to figure it out. My brother Holt was calling. Great timing on his part for once.

“Hey. What’s going on?” I answered, my attention split between a tree that had fallen across the path and waiting for Holt to speak.

“Did you really take that writer back to your place to wash off in the creek?” Holt asked. “Nellie’s practically talking wedding bells.”

“Nellie’s off her rocker. And yes, what the hell else was I supposed to do? Leave her there to sit in her own stink?” I’d been counting on him to distract me, not make me defend my actions.

He let out a soft laugh. “Man, brother. Everyone in town is talking about it.”

“I can’t help it if people want to jump to ridiculous conclusions.

She washed off, and I took her back to Nellie’s cabin.

End of story.” Yeah, right. Something deep down screamed that it was only the beginning.

But I was the ghost of Hard Timber. What had that damn blog post said?

Something about how I must not even have a soul. I deserved to be on my own.

“Well, you might want to go warn her. Lightning struck just north of Nellie’s place. Nothing but a small brush fire for now. As long as she stays put, she should be out of the path of it.”

A protectiveness I hadn’t felt in a long damn time swept over me. “Which way is it headed?”

“Nowhere near you. A crew is already on the way to take care of it. And no, they don’t need your help.”

“I wasn’t going to offer,” I lied.

“And I’ve got wings that just sprouted out of my back,” he joked. “Admit it. You’re probably already figuring out the best way to get over there without getting cut off by the fire.”

I hated it when he was right. “Fine. I won’t come.”

“Go warn your neighbor.”

“Joely,” I said. In the space of a few hours, she’d become more than just the out-of-town writer.

“Then go warn Joely. And while you’re at it, ask her if she had anything to do with the damn article. Doesn’t it seem a little suspicious that the night before she shows up in town a post calling all of us out pops up?”

I’d had the same thought before, but dismissed it after I actually met her. The timing seemed odd, but Nellie said Joely was there to do a write up about vacation rentals. “What would she have to gain from posting something like that?”

“Who knows? Some people just get off on making others’ lives miserable.” Holt let out a long sigh. “I’ve gotta go. Just keep an eye on her, will you? I’m headed over to the fire tower now. I’ll let you know if this thing shifts.”

“Be safe.” Out of all the guys who’d gone through Gunther’s volunteer summer programs, Holt was the only one who’d made firefighting his profession.

He knew what he was doing, but it didn't stop me from worrying about him.

Fighting fire, especially in the wilds of Montana, was as unpredictable as it was exhilarating.

"You too." He hung up, leaving me standing in the middle of the trail, wondering if I should head back to warn Joely or clear the tree from the path first.

The scent of smoke in the air made my decision for me. I called for Bear and turned around. If anything happened to her, I'd never be able to forgive myself.

At the same time, I wasn't sure I'd be able to face her again without leaning down and claiming her mouth with mine.

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JOELY

I'd tried working on my article. Tried reading a book. Tried wandering around Nellie's property and talking to the animals she hadn't taken to the kick-off celebration. Nothing seemed to get my mind off Thatcher Thorne.

After scarfing down a sandwich, I decided to go on a hike and see if I could find that lake. I'd been taking pictures of all the places I'd visited so far but hadn't gotten more than a few shots of Hard Timber yet. I wanted to be able to include a few photos with my submission.

I set off in the direction Thatcher had told me about.

Now that I knew where his cabin was, I planned on avoiding it.

I'd been embarrassed enough earlier when he dragged my naked body out of the creek.

Even thinking about it made my cheeks burn.

Yeah, I'd tried to laugh it off and ignore the heat his touch had sent coursing through my veins.

The absolute last thing I needed was to run into him again.

The wind picked up as a wall of dark gray clouds rolled in.

I hadn't paid much attention to the weather before I left since the sun had been shining, but I'd been told storms could pop up out of nowhere over the mountains.

I'd already been walking for about twenty minutes.

It couldn't be that much farther to the lake.

Deciding to press on, I forced my feet to move faster. I'd just snap a few quick pictures and make it back to Nellie's before the rain started.

Then lightning crackled overhead. A burst of light blinded me as a tall tree just ahead split in two. My pulse thundered in my ears and adrenaline raced through my limbs. Change of plans.

I turned around and started to run.

Movement to the left of the trail caught my eye.

Some sort of animal raced toward me. I pulled the bear spray Nellie had left at the cabin out of my bag as I stumbled down the path.

Wishing I'd read the instructions before I started out, I slowed my pace.

Whatever had been following me through the woods would be on me in a matter of seconds.

I flipped the safety clip and put my finger on the button.

"Whoa. Take your finger off the can. Nice and easy now." Thatcher stood about a dozen yards away. The animal that had been heading toward me ran by and sat down at his side. It was only his dog.

My hand shook as I lowered the can. “I thought he was...”

“It’s okay.” Thatcher took a few long strides toward me. “Anyone could have mistaken him for a bear.”

“Right.” I let out a shaky laugh. “That’s probably why you named him that, huh?”

Thatcher’s lips curled up in an almost-smile. “Right.”

I slid my backpack off my shoulders and shoved the bear spray back inside. “Sorry. I got spooked. I was trying to find the lake, but the weather turned and then lightning hit a tree and...” The words rushed out of me in a jumbled mess.

“There’s a brush fire north of Nellie’s cabin. We need to head back.” He gestured to the path behind him. “I stopped by to warn you but when you weren’t there, I got worried.”

My heart was still beating a million times a minute, and I almost missed what he said. “Wait, you came out here to find me?”

“Yeah. If anything happened to you, hell, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself, Joely.

” His forehead furrowed, making him look even more serious than usual.

I wanted to reach up and smooth the lines from between his brows.

To run my palm over his cheek. To find out if his beard would feel as soft as I thought it might against my skin.

Then thunder boomed across the sky. I looked up, wincing at the color of the clouds.

They'd gone from light gray to an angry, almost black.

"We need to get out of here. Come on. Let's get you back to Nellie's." Thatcher reached for my hand.

I let him take it. The feel of his calloused palm against mine kept me from freaking out that I was outside in the middle of what promised to be an epic thunderstorm. He walked quickly, gently pulling me with him, while Bear ran circles around us.

"Is it going to rain?" I asked.

"Hopefully. That would eliminate any threat from the brush fire."

"And if it doesn't?" I'd seen TV shows where rural firefighters couldn't get small blazes under control, and they ended up taking out thousands of acres. It didn't seem possible that could happen somewhere like Hard Timber.

"A crew is already on it. They're the best of the best. Nothing to worry about." He glanced back and even offered a reassuring smile. Or at least what might count as a smile coming from Thatcher.

The wind swirled around us, and I could smell the threat of fire in the air. We reached a split in the path and Thatcher headed right. I didn't know exactly where I was, but I would have sworn I needed to go left to get back to Nellie's.

"Are you sure that's the right way back to the cabin?" I stopped, causing him to stop with me.

"It's the way to my place," he said. "With the way the wind shifted, it's not safe to go to Nellie's."

Back to his cabin? A lump lodged in my throat, and I tried to swallow past it. When that didn't work, I cleared my throat. "We're going back to your place?"

"If you'd rather stay out here..." his words trailed off just as another clap of thunder shook the ground.

"Nope. Your place is fine." I moved ahead, my hand still clasped in his. But a part of me wondered if I should be more afraid of the storm or of what I might do when I found myself back in Thatcher's cabin... all alone with the mountain man for the second time in one day.

* * *

We reached his porch just as the sky opened up and rain pelted down.

He opened the door and motioned for me to enter first. Bear barged ahead, and I followed.

The scent of wood-smoke surrounded me. It seemed like months had passed since I'd left his place this morning, though the mug I'd used still sat on his counter.

"I'll get a fire going. If you're cold, you can grab one of my shirts or sweatshirts from the bedroom." He let go of my hand as soon as we entered and got busy stacking wood in the fireplace.

I hadn't been cold until he mentioned it.

When I left for my hike, I figured I'd be back before dark and wouldn't need a jacket.

With goosebumps popping up on my arms, I ventured into the room I assumed was his bedroom.

I flipped the switch on the wall and a lamp on the nightstand flickered.

A thick plaid comforter covered a bed that looked way too small for Thatcher.

He'd left a flannel shirt draped over the footboard and I reached for it. As I shoved my arms into the sleeves and pulled it over my shoulders, his scent surrounded me... a mix of wood-smoke, pine, and something totally unique to Thatcher. I immediately warmed from the inside out.

"Did you find something?" he called from the other room.

"Yes. Thank you." I lingered and glanced around the bedroom, looking for clues that might give me some insight. He was so closed off, but I wanted to know more.

"The fire's going." He came up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. "I can get you a clean shirt. You don't have to wear this one."

I slowly turned around to face him. "I like this one. It smells like you."

We were too close. I sucked in a breath while I waited for him to take a step back. Instead, his fingers cupped my chin, and he gently nudged my head back until I looked up and met his gaze.

He stared down at me, telling me with one look everything he'd never say with words. "I should take you into town."

Held captive by the need in his eyes, I didn't dare move. "Why?"

His hand moved up to smooth over my hair. As much as I wanted to turn my cheek into his palm, I stayed still. I was afraid if I moved, I'd break whatever spell had come over us and he'd back off. That was the very last thing I wanted.

“You’re not safe here.” His voice came out low and held an edge of warning.

I tipped my chin up even further, challenging him. “Not safe from what?”

“From me.” He shook his head, the movement so slight I might have even imagined it.

“You’re not going to hurt me.” Even as I said the words, I wasn’t sure I believed them.

I knew he wouldn’t physically hurt me, but I got the sense he was completely capable of breaking my heart.

But at that moment, I didn’t care. All I wanted was to bury myself in his arms and feel wanted for a little while.

My entire world had gone to hell, and I needed to be reminded that I wasn’t a failure at everything.

“Last chance.” He put his hands on my waist and backed me up against the wall. “Tell me to take you to town, Joely. Tell me you don’t want me. Because if you let me kiss you, I’m not going to be able to stop.”

My arms snaked up his chest, and I clasped my hands together behind his neck. “Kiss me then.”

He waited, the moment stretching out like an eternity. Then he lowered his head. His whiskers brushed my cheek. His moustache tickled my lips. His hands clamped down on my hips. Then his lips met mine.

The kiss was tentative at first, a quick brush of our lips.

Still, it sent need rippling through me.

It had been a long time since I'd been with a man, and Thatcher wasn't like any man I'd ever met.

Everything about him was more intense... his size, his attitude, even the tone of his voice. It unraveled me.

He pulled back just enough to look me in the eye. Even though he didn't say a word, the way he looked at me told me more than enough. He wanted me. Maybe almost as much as I wanted him. Whatever happened next, I'd chosen it. Chosen him. And I wasn't going to regret a damn second of it.

His lips crashed down on mine again, this time hungry and needy. I slid my hands into the hair at the nape of his neck and arched my back against the wall, desperate to get closer.

In one fluid motion, he swept me off my feet without breaking our kiss. I held on tight as he carried me over to the bed and set me down in the center. He broke contact to kick the door shut then climbed onto the bed and hovered over me.

"I've been thinking about doing this since the first time I saw you outside the cafe," he said. "You've had me tied into fucking knots."

"Really?" A man like him? In knots over a woman like me? He had to be exaggerating. Or saying whatever he thought I might want to hear so he could get laid. But Thatcher didn't strike me as the type of man who'd lie to get what he wanted.

He buried his nose in my hair like he didn't want to come up for air. "Even the way you smell makes me hard. What the fuck is that?"

“Um, skunk scrub,” I teased.

Thatcher growled against my neck. The vibration rolled right through me. I put my hands on his cheeks and brought his face back to mine.

“Kiss me again.” It wasn’t a request.

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THATCHER

I'd warned her once I started, I wouldn't be able to stop.

Every kiss, every touch, every taste of her drove me more and more wild, sending me closer and closer to an edge I swore I'd never fall over again.

But with Joely, I couldn't help myself. She was sugar and spice all rolled into one.

The combination was as sweet as it was intoxicating.

I didn't give myself time to think. If I had, I never would have slid my hand under her shirt and trailed my finger up her belly and under the band of her bra.

The soft moan she let out only fueled the fire that burned through me.

She reached up and tugged at my shirt. If she wanted it gone, I wasn't going to deny her.

I pulled it over my head and tossed it on the floor. "Your turn, sweetpea."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" She shrugged out of my flannel and threw her shirt on top of mine.

"I don't know. Seems fitting." She was like the sweetpea vines my mom planted outside the cabin where I grew up. Beautiful and resilient, no matter how many times my brothers and I stomped over them, the sweet-smelling flowers always came back.

“Well, don’t stop. I kind of like it.” She propped herself up on her elbows, her full tits spilling out of her bra.

My mouth fucking watered while I reached behind her and unclasped the annoying thing. Her eyes widened, followed by a shy smile.

“Lie back. I need to taste you.”

As soon as her back hit the bed, I sucked one of her nipples into my mouth, groaning as it hardened under my tongue.

I thought I’d be able to maintain some self-control, but this woman was under my skin.

The weird thing was, I didn’t mind. The two of us...

we felt good together. Like I’d been waiting for her to show up for a long goddamn time.

Her fingers fumbled with the button at my waist. Hell to the yeah. I wasn’t sure how long I’d last once she wrapped her legs around my middle, but I’d make sure she was satisfied before I let myself go.

I shed my jeans and boxers then bent over her and tugged her leggings off until she was as naked as she’d been in the creek.

Spread out on my bed, her hair covering my pillow, I raked my gaze over her creamy skin, her gorgeous tits, and stopped at the apex of her thighs.

She was beautiful. The most gorgeous woman I’d ever seen.

And I was about to make her mine, at least for the night.

“Thatcher...” She held her arms out, but I had other plans.

“Not yet, sweetpea.” I leaned down and settled my shoulders between her thighs. Spreading her legs as wide as they would go, I inhaled the sweet scent of her desire. Then I licked along her seam. Her muscles tensed and she tried to draw her knees up to her belly.

I put my arm over her hips, pinning her in place and circled her clit with my tongue. She squirmed underneath me, her back arching.

“Let me make you feel good,” I said.

“Yes, please.” She nodded as she fisted her hands in the comforter.

Grinning, I lowered my head again. I couldn’t get enough.

Swirling my tongue over her clit, I slipped a finger just inside her pussy.

She was so wet, so fucking ready for me.

Over and over, I sucked on that bundle of nerves, sliding my finger in and out until her walls clenched around me and her legs started to shake.

“That’s it, sweetpea,” I mumbled against her thigh.

Watching her come on my tongue was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. When the last wave of her orgasm had finishing pulsing against my lips, I kissed my way up her body.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled my mouth to hers. Our tongues tangled while I flipped her over on top of me. I'd intended on giving her a few minutes to rest before I took her with my cock, but the little minx lined up her pussy at the tip of my cock.

"Easy there, baby," I warned her. "You tease me like that and you're going to find my cock buried deep inside you."

"What if that's what I want?" She arched her back and pushed her tits out.

"Then I'd better get a condom," I said, already reaching for the drawer.

She took it from me, slid it down on my cock, and straddled my hips. Staring up at her, I felt like I'd died and gone to heaven. Then she eased herself onto me. My eyes rolled back in my head. The walls of her pussy clenched around me. So tight. So good.

I clamped my hands on her hips and lifted her up and down. Just seeing her tits bounce while she rode me was enough to make me fucking blow. But watching her watching me, her eyes half closed, the ghost of a smile on her lips... within seconds I was ready to detonate.

She came hard, her head tilted back, her pussy gripping me tight.

After, she leaned forward for a kiss and her nipples grazed my chest. I flipped her over, my need to take control rising.

It didn't take more than a few thrusts before my balls clenched, and I came so fucking hard my arms shook.

I groaned, wishing I could stay balls-deep inside her forever.

And when I finally let go, I slanted my mouth over hers, claiming her.

Her cheek rested on my chest, her fingertip lazily running up and down my abs. We'd snuggled under the covers, and I'd pulled her close. I wasn't used to cuddling, to sharing my space, especially my bed, with a woman.

Outside, the clouds had finally opened up and raindrops splattered down on the roof. Darkness had fallen, and I had no idea what time it was or how long we'd been laying there. However long it had been, I didn't want it to end.

That was what scared me most. Somehow Joely had worked her way past all the barriers I'd set up. She'd wedged herself into my heart and as much as I didn't want to let her go, I wasn't sure how the hell I'd convince her to stay.

She ran her finger over the raised, puckered scar along my side. "Where did you get this?"

"Fire crew training summer of my senior year. I thought I was invincible."

She let out a soft laugh. "How about now?"

"Now I know better."

"Sounds like progress to me." Her fingers stilled. "I've never met anyone like you, Thatcher."

It didn't sound like a compliment, and I didn't take it that way. "You probably ought to run while you can."

She nuzzled closer, her palm skimming over my belly. "I think I'll take my chances. You're not nearly as scary as you think you are."

“Something to work on, I guess.” Damn her.

She was tempting me to believe in shit like happy ever afters.

I splayed my hand over the small of her back while I wondered how this would end.

As much as I wanted her, literally craved the feel of her in my arms, I wasn't made for anything long term.

Yeah, I'd claimed her. She'd fucking imprinted on my heart and soul. But that didn't mean we'd last.

I was the Ghost of Hard Timber. The name might sting, but I didn't earn that label by sticking around.

Her stomach growled against my side. It had been hours since I'd found her on the trail, and I hadn't thought to ask her if she was hungry. Protectiveness surged.

“You need something to eat, sweetpea. How about an omelet?” I was already sliding my arm out from underneath her when she flipped on top of me.

“Don't get up yet. I'd rather be hungry and stay like this.”

I was tempted. But I also knew that if I didn't get some space, I might get way too used to this. To having her here... to having her next to me... to having her in my bed.

“Food first.” I pressed a kiss to forehead as I rolled out of bed then reached for my jeans. “You stay here, and I'll bring it to you in a bit.”

She pulled the covers up to her chin and damn if I didn't love the way she looked in

my bed. Her bottom lip thrust out in a slight pout, and it took every bit of willpower not to sink back down on the bed and kiss that frown away.

I padded out to the kitchen. Bear scrambled off the couch and stretched. He wasn't supposed to get on the furniture, but I didn't have the heart to scold him. Not when I'd locked myself in my room and failed to feed him dinner.

He stood by the door, not caring that it was raining outside. I let him out then scrounged around, looking for something to toss into the omelet I'd promised Joely.

What the fuck was I doing with the writer from out of town?

I was too old for a fling and too hardened to consider an actual relationship.

I cracked a few eggs into the bowl and whisked them faster than necessary.

The skillet sizzled as I tossed in some onions and diced peppers from the fridge.

This wasn't just breakfast-for-dinner. It was about grounding myself.

About doing something while my insides felt like they were turning to mush over a woman who'd been in my life for, what, a few days?

The door to the bedroom creaked open. I glanced over and almost dropped the spatula. Joely stood there in nothing but one of my flannel shirts, the hem brushing her thighs. Her hair was a mess, and her lips were swollen from our kisses. She looked rumpled, radiant, and mine.

"I told you to stay in bed."

"You did." She crossed the room barefoot. "But then you said omelet, and I didn't

want to miss out on seeing you standing in front of a stove.”

I let out a soft laugh and rubbed my hand over my belly. “I didn’t get to be this size without figuring out how to feed myself.”

She smiled and grabbed two plates from the cabinet. Damn if that didn’t tug at something in my chest. She fit in, almost too well. And that scared the shit out of me.

We sat down, our knees brushing under the table as Bear came in, flopped down at our feet, and let out a contented huff. Thunder rumbled in the distance, low and lazy now that the worst of the storm had passed.

As much as I didn’t want to think about it, I could get used to this. And a part of me deep down inside wanted to try.

Joely was mid-bite when her phone lit up and vibrated against the table. She glanced at the screen and froze, the muscles in her jaw tightening.

“Everything okay?” I asked, bracing for what she might say.

She wiped her fingers on a napkin and picked up the phone. “It’s the editor who hired me for the piece I’m writing. I’d better take it.”

She stepped outside onto the covered porch, the door clicking shut behind her.

I tried not to listen, but she stood in front of the window, and I caught enough to know the conversation wasn’t casual.

Her voice was sharper than usual, more clipped.

A few yeahs , a few mmhmms , and then a long pause. When she came back in, she

didn't sit.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"Yeah. That was..." she trailed off, pressing her lips together. "My editor wants to tack on a new angle for the story."

I raised a brow, suspicious. "What kind of angle?"

She slid back onto her chair. "Have you heard about something called The Ex-List?"

A muscle jumped in my jaw, and I reached for my coffee. I didn't want to lie, but I also didn't want to admit I was number two on the damn list since she clearly didn't know. "What kind of story does your editor want?"

"Apparently someone posted a blog calling out six emotionally unavailable mountain men in Hard Timber. It's gotten enough traction online that my editor thinks it's worthy of its own story."

Fuck me. "And she wants you to write about it?"

"She thinks it would make the perfect companion piece to the one on vacation rentals. 'Grit meets gossip'—that's how she pitched it." Joely gave a tight laugh. "She said if I can track down the guys on that list, I can give them a chance to tell their side of things."

"Are you going to do it?" My voice was calm. Too calm.

"I don't know. I told her I'd think about it. I don't love the idea of airing people's dirty laundry, but..." She rubbed the back of her neck. "I came here to write something meaningful. If I could find the truth behind it and show some

heart—maybe there's a bigger story worth telling.”

I nodded slowly, my heart jumping around the inside of my chest like an out-of-control jackhammer. “So, you're hunting down mountain men now?”

Joely smiled faintly. “Guess so.”

She didn't realize how close she already was.

And I sure as hell wasn't going to be the one to tell her.

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JOELY

The rain had eased into a steady drizzle by the time we finished eating. A soft hush clung to the cabin, broken only by the occasional hiss of the woodstove or the clink of a fork against ceramic. I sat cross-legged in one of the kitchen chairs, trying not to over analyze Thatcher's silence.

The time we'd spend together had been... more than I expected. And I wasn't just talking about the sex.

It was the way he'd looked at me—like I wasn't just some woman passing through town. The way his touch had gone from demanding to reverent. The way I'd felt safe, stripped bare, and seen.

But now?

He was quiet. Way too quiet.

He cleared the plates with methodical precision. No teasing. No smirk. Just rinsing and stacking like the fate of the world depended on a spotless kitchen.

"I wasn't planning to tell you about the article," I said, hoping to pop the bubble of weirdness forming between us. "But I didn't want to lie either."

He didn't look up. "You didn't lie."

"My editor just thought about adding The Ex-List angle yesterday," I said. "And it's

not even the focus, just a sidebar.”

Still no reaction. His back remained turned as he dried his hands on a towel.

“You’re mad.”

“No.” He finally turned around. “I’m not mad.”

“But something’s wrong.”

He leaned against the counter, crossing his arms, eyes unreadable. “It’s fine. It’s just... complicated.”

A tightness settled in my chest. “Do you think I’m going to write something that hurts people?”

“No.” He exhaled slowly. “I think you’re going to do your job. And that’s your right.”

Oof. That landed like a slap. He’d turned as cold as the creek. Like I was suddenly nothing more than a hack with a notebook and a deadline. “It’s not like I want to write fluff pieces about vacation rentals and relationships gone wrong.”

“Then why are you?”

“Because that’s the only kind of work left for journalists who are forced out of their jobs for trying to do the right thing.”

Thatcher’s eyes softened. “Is that what happened to you?”

“Yeah. Evidently city council members don’t take kindly to having a junior reporter

blow their ring of corruption wide open. My boss refused to run the story, and my source got fired after I swore I'd protect her." I wiped at my eyes, refusing to let the tears fall.

"I'm sorry," Thatcher said.

I stood and folded my arms to match his. "'It doesn't matter anymore. I've moved on. Got myself a great freelance gig that brought me to you.'"

He stiffened as I reached out to touch him.

I didn't see that coming, but I shouldn't be surprised. We'd shared a moment, and it was over. Even though it meant a lot more than a one-night stand to me, he hadn't made me any promises. "Do you want to just pretend that everything between us didn't happen?"

That got his attention, and his eyes snapped to mine. "Of course not."

"It kind of feels like it."

He raked a hand through his hair. "I just need some time to think."

"Think about what?" My mind spun with possibilities. Did he need to think about me? About how stupid it was to let me in? About how fast things moved? About what a mistake it had all been?

He didn't answer. Just stared at the wall like the knots in the wood held the secret to all of life's problems.

"I should go," I muttered, walking past him to shove my feet into my boots.

“It’s dark out. Let me walk you back.” He finally moved though I could tell he was just being polite. His heart wasn’t into this, wasn’t into me.

“That’s not necessary.” I let myself out and started down the path back to Nellie’s.

The stubborn man followed a few yards behind until I got to the cabin and let myself in.

Once inside, I went to the window and caught sight of him walking away.

We were both better off. That’s what I kept telling myself.

Maybe I’d eventually start to believe it.

* * *

I didn’t sleep.

Not more than an hour or two, anyway. I tossed and turned through most of the night, staring at the dark ceiling of the Hideaway, replaying every second in Thatcher’s cabin.

How it felt to have his arms around me. How his expression shifted when I told him about the article.

How hurt I’d been when he didn’t stop me from leaving.

Watching him walk away through the window of the cabin felt like a goodbye. A subtle, soul-deep rejection I hadn’t seen coming. The worst part was, I should have known better.

Morning dawned clear, too cheerful for how heavy my chest felt.

I tugged on yesterday's jeans, pulled my hair into a messy bun, and drove into town because I couldn't sit in that quiet fairytale cabin one minute longer. Not when my chest ached and my thoughts were tangled up in an iceberg of a man who didn't want a thing to do with me.

The smell of coffee and cinnamon brought me back to life the second I opened the door to the Huckleberry Cafe.

The cafe was already buzzing when I stepped inside.

Locals filled the booths and counter stools, sipping from mismatched mugs and chatting like everyone knew everyone, which they probably did.

It was the kind of cozy, homey chaos that should have made me feel better. Today, it just made the hollow spot in my chest feel even bigger.

Nellie spotted me the moment I walked in and nodded toward a booth in the back. She didn't bring a menu. Just a steaming mug of coffee and a warm smile.

"Well, you look like someone with a story to tell who needs a cinnamon roll first," she said as she slid into the seat across from me.

I gave a tired laugh. "That bad, huh?"

"You've got heartbreak-face, sugar. And I know heartbreak-face. Let me guess." She narrowed her eyes. "This wouldn't have anything to do with a certain broody mountain man with a wounded heart and a jaw carved from granite?"

I blinked. "Thatcher? How...?"

She gave me a look. “Please. Two people come back from the farmers’ market skunked to high heaven, one of them ends up staying the night at a certain cabin in the woods, and you think I wouldn’t piece it together?”

I rubbed my forehead. “We didn’t... it wasn’t like that.”

Her brow arched. “Then why do you look like you haven’t slept, and your heart just fell down a well?”

I couldn’t answer. Not right away. Because the truth sat too heavy in my throat.

“I think I messed up,” I whispered.

Nellie’s expression softened. “What happened?”

I hesitated, then said, “We were eating dinner. I told him my editor wants me to write a follow-up piece to the vacation rental article. About The Ex-List.”

The moment the words left my mouth, Nellie’s lips pressed into a tight line.

“He shut down like I’d flipped a switch.” Thinking about it again splintered my heart into even more pieces.

Nellie let out a long breath. “You don’t know, do you?”

“Don’t know what?”

She gave me a long look. One that made my stomach twist even before she said a word. “Thatcher’s on that list.”

My heart slammed against my ribs. “No, that can’t be right. I asked if he knew

anything about it and he just...”

Trailed off. Went quiet. Turned cold. I stared out the window toward the mountains. He thought I was just like everyone else who’d hurt him. Thought I’d turn his story into some punchline in a damn listicle.

“Number two,” Nellie said as she reached across the table and put her hands over mine. “They called him the Ghost of Hard Timber. The women he dated never stood a chance. He couldn’t commit. Didn’t even try.”

The air in the cafe suddenly felt too warm. I pulled my hands out from under hers and wrapped them around the mug. “No wonder he looked like I’d kicked his dog when I mentioned The Ex-List.”

“You didn’t know,” Nellie said gently. “But now you do.”

Now I did. And suddenly, a lot of things made sense, like the way he flinched when I got too close, how he held me like he wanted forever but looked like it might kill him to say so.

“He thinks I’m going to write about him.”

Nellie nodded. “It hurt him to be put on that list, even if it was only meant to light a fire under his butt.”

I swallowed hard. “But he never told me. Why didn’t he just say something?”

“Because people like Thatcher don’t talk about pain. They carry it until it hardens around their heart like bark on a tree.” She paused. “You saw the scar, didn’t you? On his side?”

I nodded.

“He got that in a wildfire when he was a teenager. He was trying to hold things together at home, helping out with his brothers and sister since his mama passed and his daddy wasn’t worth a damn.

He still showed up for training with my husband that summer.

Nearly bled out before help arrived, but he made it through. Didn’t complain once. Just kept going.”

My throat ached. “He said he thought he was invincible back then.”

“He was wrong,” Nellie said, her voice soft. “And after that fire, he stopped letting people in. He grew up, graduated high school and disappeared into the woods. Now he only comes to town for supplies. Refuses to let anyone get close.”

I sat back, my eyes stinging.

He’d let me close. And the second he felt threatened, he’d shut me out again. “I wasn’t going to write anything mean. That’s not who I am.”

“I know,” Nellie said. “And way deep down, he probably does too. But fear doesn’t always listen to reason.”

I stared down at the coffee swirling in my cup. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Give him time,” she said. “But don’t wait forever, honey. Some men are worth chasing down the trail. And some need a push to come out of the woods.”

I gave her a watery smile. “You ever thought about becoming a life coach?”

“I had enough of that as a guidance counselor,” Nellie said with a wink. “Now I’d rather sling biscuits for a living. It’s a lot easier.”

I laughed, the sound a little cracked around the edges, but still real. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

“Of course, sugar.”

“Did you write it?”

Nellie chuckled and shook her head. “No. But I know who did, and I know why. That list wasn’t meant to hurt those boys. It was meant to wake them up.”

I sat with that for a long moment, something sharp and bright flickering to life inside me.

Maybe it had.

But the question now was... what was I going to do about it?

“Let me get you a refill on that coffee. I’ve got a box of cinnamon rolls with your name on it.” Nellie got up from the table, leaving me with a lot to think about.

Even though everything had gone to hell with Thatcher, even though he’d built walls around his heart as thick as the mountains surrounding his cabin, I wasn’t giving up just yet.

* * *

Back at the cabin, I lit a fire in the fireplace. It wasn’t that cold outside, but I craved the comfortable glow of the flames. I set my laptop on the table and opened a new

document. My fingers hovered over the keys.

I could see the structure of the piece so clearly in my head... the hook, the witty tone. I'd normally shape the words into a sharp, sparkly read that people would click on and laugh about and share in group chats.

But every word felt like a betrayal.

Because I knew one of the men on that list now. Not as a rumor. Not as a nickname. Not as an anonymous ghost.

As Thatcher.

And he wasn't a ghost at all. He was flesh and bone with visible scars and wounds deep down inside. He was calloused hands and hot coffee. He was hard muscle and soft kisses and whispered words against my skin in the dark.

He'd let me in, and then he'd shut me out. And I didn't know how to write about that.

I rested my forehead on the edge of my laptop and groaned.

The cursor kept blinking, accusing me of not trying.

I opened a new document. Titled it The Truth About Ghosts and then stared at the screen again. What was I even trying to say?

That sometimes the people we label as distant are just the ones who've been burned the worst? That sometimes the ones who push you away are doing it because they're terrified of what it means to let you stay?

I clicked into the document, my fingers flying over the keyboard before I could stop

them.

Ghosts don't always haunt places. Sometimes they haunt their own lives. Sometimes, they're not even ghosts at all. They're just men trying to keep their hearts safe. And sometimes, if you're lucky, you get close enough to see what they're really made of.

Tears blurred the words until I couldn't read them anymore.

I didn't want to write about Thatcher or any of the other Hard Timber mountain men on that damn list. I wanted to fight for him.

Even if I didn't know how. Even if he wasn't ready.

Even if I ended up walking away with nothing but the echo of his voice in my chest and the smell of wood smoke clinging to my clothes.

I closed the document. Saved it. Then shut my laptop with a soft click.

Tomorrow, I'd figure out what to tell my editor. Tonight, I just needed to sit in the silence and let myself feel all of it. The ache. The hope. The wild, ridiculous, painful, wonderful fact that I'd fallen for a man who'd already warned me he might disappear.

And somehow, I still wanted to believe he wouldn't.

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THATCHER

The bell over the door gave its usual jingle as I stepped inside The Huckleberry Cafe. I'd intentionally picked the lull between lunch and dinner to stop by. There were just a few locals nursing their mugs and pretending not to notice me. I wasn't exactly known for casual drop-ins.

Nellie glanced up from behind the counter, took one look at me, and reached for a clean mug. "Well, if it isn't the Ghost himself."

I sighed. "Please don't start."

"Too late." She slid the coffee across the counter. "You look like you didn't sleep last night. Let me guess, woman trouble?"

I took the stool nearest the register and wrapped my hands around the mug. "She left my place last night like the floor was on fire."

"Did you deserve it?"

I didn't answer. Which, of course, was an answer.

Nellie gave a knowing hum and grabbed a rag, wiping down a clean section of the counter just for something to do. "You know, I told myself I wouldn't meddle. But that poor girl came in here this morning lookin' like someone canceled Christmas."

My jaw tensed. "She's writing a story."

“About you?”

“No. About the town. About rentals. Maybe now about the list.”

Her hand stilled. “Ah.”

“She doesn’t know yet,” I added quickly. “Not about me being on it. But she will.”

“Then you’ve got two choices, sugar. Wait for her to find out and assume the worst or beat her to it and show her the truth.”

“And what if the truth doesn’t make a damn difference?”

“Then you’ll know you tried.” Nellie folded her arms, eyes sharp and steady. “But if you don’t tell her who you are—really are—then you’re just proving the list right.”

I stared into the steam rising off my coffee. Every instinct I had screamed at me to protect what little peace I’d built. But peace wasn’t the same thing as happiness. And with Joely? I’d had a taste of something different. Something real.

“I’m tired, Nellie,” I said quietly. “Of hiding. Of pretending like I don’t want more.”

“Then stop,” she said, gentle now. “Wanting more doesn’t make you weak. It makes you brave.”

I stood slowly, the weight in my chest easing just enough to let the air back in. “You think it’s too late?”

Nellie smiled, soft but certain. “Not if you get off that stool and go tell her.”

My mind spun. “Can you do me a favor?”

“Just say the word.”

“Convince Joely to meet me at the clearing between our cabins? I’ve got something in mind.”

She nodded. “I’ll make sure she’s there.”

I headed for the door, her voice chasing after me.

“Try not to screw it up, Thatcher.”

I was going to do my best.

* * *

The waterfall looked exactly the way it had the last time I’d been here. Hidden by a curtain of fir and pine, the water spilled down the face of the rocks into a deep pool below. It was a magical place and until now, it had been all mine. It was time to stop keeping things to myself.

I wasn’t sure whether she would show, but Nellie said she’d make her come. And I trusted Nellie more than I trusted myself these days.

I retraced my steps to the clearing where I asked Nellie to have Joely meet me.

Bear must have sensed how much I needed him because he stayed at my side.

Even though I hadn’t come close to breaking a sweat, my heart pounded like I’d just hauled a full load of timber up a mountain.

I’d never been nervous around a woman before, though I’d never let one close

enough to need a moment like this.

But Joely wasn't like anyone I'd ever known. She saw through me. Actually, saw the real me. And I'd pushed her away.

I could still picture the moment she'd turned to go.

How the hurt shone in her eyes as I broke her beautiful heart.

I'd followed her back to Nellie's to make sure she got there safely without saying a fucking word.

Then I'd gone home and taken my frustration out on a woodpile, hating myself for every word I didn't say.

For every wall I'd rebuilt just when she'd finally started to scale them.

Now it was all on me to tear them down. Holt once told me some things were better left buried, and I believed him for a long time. That might work for him, but I'd started to think some things are worth digging up, even if it's hard as hell.

A soft rustle behind me had my breath jamming in my throat.

I turned to catch Joely stepping out of the trees.

The wind caught the hem of my flannel shirt she'd shrugged on over a tank top, and her hair fell in a long braid over her shoulder.

She had on hiking boots and jeans with a look on her face that told me she didn't know what she was walking into and wasn't sure she wanted to find out.

“Hey. Thanks for coming.”

“Nellie said you had something to show me.” She held up an envelope with my name scrawled across the front. “I’ve got something to show you too.”

Whatever was in that envelope could wait. First, I needed her to know I was ready to let her in.

“Will you come with me?” I wanted to reach for her hand but wasn’t sure I could handle rejection, so I nudged my chin toward the path ahead.

Her chin tipped up, she took a step toward me. “Lead the way.”

I’d worn this trail into the dirt over the years, every bend and root etched into my memory.

But today, everything felt unfamiliar and awkward.

My boots dragged. My breath caught. The only sound between us was the breeze blowing through the pines and the sound of water flowing over the rocks. I slowed as we approached the clearing.

“We’re almost there,” I said, keeping my voice low. “The first time I found this spot, I didn’t tell anyone. Not even my brothers.”

Joely didn’t answer, but I sensed the anticipation. Felt it like a nudge against my ribs. I pushed the last branches aside and held them back for her to step through.

The waterfall crashed over smooth rock, foaming into a deep blue pool. Late morning light filtered through the canopy, catching the spray and painting rainbows across the clearing. The air was cooler here, damp with mist. I turned, waiting for her reaction.

She stepped past me, her lips parting, eyes wide. “It’s amazing.”

“I know,” I said, my voice tight. “I’m glad you got to see it. I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“Nellie made me,” she said, stopping just shy of the pool. “She said you’d make it worth my while.”

Her eyes darted to mine, guarded and cautious with the slightest hint of a challenge.

I cleared my throat. “This place has always been mine. It’s where I come when I need to remember who the hell I am.”

“And who’s that, exactly?” she whispered.

I was done hiding. Done trying to tell myself it wouldn’t be worth it to put myself out there. I’d found something worth fighting for in Joely and it was time to let down my guard. “I’m just a guy who’s learning how to open up a little at a time.”

She didn’t say anything, but something in her expression softened, like maybe she was starting to believe me.

“I’ve never wanted to share this place with anyone,” I said. “Now that you’re here, I can say it’s definitely better with company.”

“I figured you’d be out clearing trails or avoiding people.”

“Usually, yeah. But I asked Nellie to send you here. Told her I needed a chance to fix what I broke.”

Joely crossed her arms. “Is that what this is? A peace offering from the town ghost?”

Ouch.

“I deserve that,” I said, taking a step closer. “And worse.”

She didn’t argue.

“I didn’t mean to shut you out, Joely. I was scared. Hell, I still am. You walked into my life and shook the ground under my feet. I didn’t know what to do with that.”

She raised an eyebrow. “So, you thought blowing me off would make it easier?”

Her words stung. That’s not what I’d intended. “I thought if I backed off before you got too close, maybe it wouldn’t hurt so much when you left.”

Joely’s face softened, but only a little. “What changed?”

“I realized something.”

She tilted her chin up.

“I’m tired of being a ghost. Tired of hiding out in the woods like I don’t belong anywhere. You made me want to be seen again, Joely. And that scares the hell out of me—but I’m standing here anyway.”

Her throat bobbed. “Why here?”

I nodded toward the waterfall. “Because I wanted to share this with you. Wanted to be the one to show you the way.”

She looked up at the cascade of water, lips pressed together, eyes glassy.

“I didn’t know you were on the list,” she said.

“That’s not why I brought you here.” I took a step forward. “I brought you here because I’ve been a coward. You made me feel something I didn’t think I was allowed to want anymore.”

Her brows edged up with interest, and I pressed on.

“I spent years making damn sure nobody got close. Figured if I didn’t let anyone in, I couldn’t lose anything. I didn’t plan on someone like you showing up. Someone who just laughed while I growled, who chased skunks through hardware stores?—”

A ghost of a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

“Someone who made me question everything.”

Her arms loosened, but she didn’t move.

“You said something when we first met. About how I wasn’t as scary as I thought I was,” I continued.

“You were wrong. I am scary. But not for the reasons you think. I’m scary because I care too damn much and don’t know what to do with it.

I’m scary because the thought of losing you makes my chest feel like it’s being ripped open. ”

She stepped closer, but still not near enough to touch.

I took a breath and went for it. “I told myself I couldn’t have you. That people like you don’t stay. But maybe that’s just a story I’ve been telling myself to avoid the

truth.”

“What’s the truth?” Her voice was soft, but it didn’t waver.

“That I want you to stay. Not for a night. Not for the summer. For good.”

Her eyes searched mine, looking for the truth. “What if I leave anyway?”

My heart cracked clean in half, but I nodded. “Then I’ll be proud of myself for telling you what you mean to me. And I’ll still think of you every single second of every fucking day.”

We stood in the silence, the falls behind us, the space between us charged with everything unsaid.

Finally, Joely exhaled. “You asshole.”

My brows shot up.

“You can’t just bring me to the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen and say all that.” Her voice broke on the last word.

I took another step forward. “Why not?”

“Because I’m trying really hard not to fall for you.”

My fingers twitched. “Then let me help you fall.”

She laughed through a sob. “You’re infuriating.”

“And yours if you’ll have me,” I said.

She didn't respond. Instead, she crossed the last of the space between us, wrapped her arms around my neck, and kissed me like I was the only man in the world.

The waterfall kept crashing, birds kept singing, but everything else stilled. There was only Joely, soft and sure in my arms, tasting like tears and the happy ever after I never thought I'd deserve.

When we finally broke apart, she rested her forehead against mine.

"I'm not writing the article about The Ex-List," she whispered. "I don't want to tell the story the way the world expected. I want to write something real."

"Then that's what you should do, sweetpea." My heart was so full I thought it might split from happiness. That's when she handed me the envelope. "What's this?"

"I want you to know that I do see you. You're not a ghost to me, Thatcher."

I pulled out a sheet of paper and read over the words she'd written about me, about us. It wasn't long, just a few paragraphs. But her words were sharp and honest and real. She saw me—not the ghost, not the grump in the woods—but the man underneath.

I folded the paper slowly, my throat thick. All the things I hadn't known how to say... she'd already seen them. Every scar. Every wall. Every truth. So, I wrapped my arms tighter around her and said the only thing that mattered. "You might think it's too soon, but I love you, sweetpea."

"It's never too soon if it's real." She pulled my head down for another kiss. "And I love you too, mountain man."

We stood there in the mist, the wind tugging at our clothes, and Bear circling our

legs.

I kissed her, deep and slow and full of everything I was feeling.

Her hands curled into my shirt and mine cradled her hips.

The falls were the only witness to the moment I let go of every fear I'd been holding and finally let her in. For good.

A FEW MONTHS LATER

Joely

Our waterfall was even more beautiful in winter.

Snow dusted the rocks in powdery swirls, and ice framed the edges of the pool like delicate lace. The sound of the falls had changed too, becoming more like a murmur, like the land itself had quieted to listen.

Thatcher stood next to me on the ridge above, one hand in mine, the other resting on Bear's head.

His flannel collar was dusted with snow, and his beard had caught a few flecks of frost. He looked like the mountain itself had decided to grow a man—stubborn, solid, and so much more than he gave himself credit for.

“You cold?” he asked, giving my hand a squeeze.

“I’m good.” I leaned into his side. “Just taking it in.” And I was.

Not just the view, though the frozen spray sparkling like diamonds made it hard to look away.

I was taking in everything . The trail that had nearly swallowed me that first weekend, the town that had charmed me against my will, the man I’d wanted to run from—but couldn’t.

This had become our place. Not just the waterfall, but all of it.

The ridge. The cabin with the creaky porch step he still hadn't fixed.

The local gossip that somehow became my circle of support.

The dog who curled up at my feet every morning like he'd always known I belonged.

And Thatcher. My mountain man. My ghost-turned-home.

After I declined to write a story about the men behind The Ex-List, I decided not to take on any more freelance assignments.

The people in Hard Timber deserved to have their stories told.

So, writing about real life in small-town rural Montana became my passion. That meant I could write from anywhere.

So, I chose to stay.

I chose him.

Nellie had cried when I told her. Then she'd shoved a baby goat into my arms and called it a blessing.

She'd been collecting more and more strays.

One of her new rescues was a retired therapy llama with a mysterious past and no sense of personal space.

I'd somehow inherited feeding duties, but I didn't mind.

Word had gotten around that the “Ghost of Hard Timber” had been claimed, and no one was happier about it than the town matchmaker herself.

“I still think you could’ve done better,” she’d teased, while bagging a Thatcher-sized cinnamon roll. “But I’ve been wrong once or twice in my life.”

“Only once or twice?” I’d asked, raising a brow.

“Maybe three times, if you count that bad perm I had in the 80s.” She’d winked. Then slid a huckleberry pie across the counter for free.

I smiled at the memory, then glanced at Thatcher. “Are you sure about all this?”

He looked over, one brow lifting. “All of what?”

“This,” I said, gesturing to the snowy trail behind us, the view in front of us, and everything in between. “Building a life together, sharing your cabin, making me chocolate chip pancakes every Saturday... me.”

His mouth curved into a half-smile. “You’re really questioning the pancakes?”

I fake-elbowed him in the ribs. “You know what I mean.”

Thatcher stepped in front of me and took both my hands, his expression turning more serious. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “I’m sure. That’s why I brought something.”

He let go with one hand and reached into his coat pocket.

I froze as he pulled out a small, hand-carved wooden box. My breath caught, hard and fast, as the air between us changed.

“You made that, didn’t you?” I asked, touching the edge of the lid. The wood grain had been sanded smooth, the design etched in carefully: wildflowers blooming around a set of pine trees.

“Yeah. Took me a while. I had to get it right. Now before you get any ideas,” he said, flipping it open to reveal a simple gold band with a single round diamond, “I’m not asking you to change your name.

I’m not asking you to give up your career.

I’m just asking you to keep choosing me. One day at a time.”

My heart cracked wide open. I’d always imagined I’d want something dramatic, something huge. A billboard proposal or a flash mob. But this? This quiet moment in the snow, at our place, with the man who had once warned me to run? This was everything.

I nodded, waiting for the words that would bind us together forever.

“Joely, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I choked out, my voice thick with emotion.

He tugged off my glove and squeezed my hand in his.

“Nellie’s going to be telling everyone who’ll listen that we’re getting married. You’re not very good at flying under the radar these days, you know that?” I said.

He grinned. “Yeah? Must be the company I keep.”

I laughed and stepped into his arms, kissing him slow and sure. “I choose you,

Thatcher Thorne. One day at a time.”

He slipped the ring onto my finger. It wasn’t flashy or fancy. Just warm metal and steady weight. A promise in a circle.

“Let’s celebrate. I brought a thermos,” he said, nudging me toward a fallen log. “And something sweet.”

“You brought snacks to your proposal?”

A slow smile spread across his lips. “I figured I’d need backup in case you said no.”

I laughed, blinking back a tear that had nothing to do with the cold. “Smart man.”

We sat close, sharing coffee and a couple of cinnamon rolls he’d smuggled from the cafe. I let my head rest on his shoulder.

“What happens now?” I asked.

“We keep doing this. Just living life together. Choosing each other every single day until the end of time.” He paused. “But there’s one more thing I wanted to show you.”

He reached into his coat again, this time pulling out a folded sheet of paper.

I unfolded it and skimmed the top of the flyer.

Hard Timber Outdoor Education & Environmental Writing Residency

Launching Spring Session – Applications now open.

I looked up, stunned. “This is... what is this?”

“I talked to some folks,” he said. “State program, regional grants, private donors. We made room for a seasonal educator and writer-in-residence. You’d be the first.”

“You made a job for me?”

“You already made a life here. This just makes it official.”

Tears burned my eyes. I set down my coffee and threw my arms around him. “I can’t believe you did all this.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised. You taught me how to fight for what matters.”

“And this matters?” I whispered.

He nodded, solemn. “You matter.”

We stayed like that until our coffee went cold. Until the snow began to fall again and Bear barked at a rabbit and the sun started to dip low enough to turn the sky pink.

Finally, I stood and looked back at the trailhead.

“Ready to head back?” he asked.

“Not yet. One more thing.” I dug into my own pocket, pulling out a tiny spiral notebook.

He frowned. “What’s that?”

“My next article.” I flipped it open. “I want to call it What the Mountain Man Taught

Me .”

He gave a rough laugh, eyes shining. “Sounds like a good one.”

“It’s got a hell of a happy ending.”

“Yeah.” He reached for my hand. “I’m sure it does. Come on, sweetpea. Let’s go home.”

He tucked me into his side, and we started down the trail together. The snow crunched under our boots, and Bear raced ahead, checking out his domain like he owned the whole forest.

The ridge behind us faded from view, the waterfall’s hush becoming background music for the next part of our story.

And I knew, with the steady weight of the ring on my finger, the warm squeeze of his hand in mine, and the whole damn town waiting to welcome us back, Thatcher wasn’t a ghost anymore. Just my mountain man, leading me home.

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5 YEARS LATER

Hazel had been into the crayons again.